IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

'Omni-Reader' concept great, if it only worked

Imagine a hand-held device that, when passed over a line of typewritten text, recognizes the alphanumeric characters and inserts them into whatever program you're using on your personal computer. A nifty idea, wouldn't you say, and possibly a real money-saver in business offices when you consider it could eliminate retyping data whenever it's copied from existing documents.

Well, it was such a good idea that a now-defunct company called Oberon International designed and produced such a device, named it the "Omni-Reader," and began selling it for the meager sum of $799.

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By either magic, luck or stupidity, it was proclaimed "Product of '85" by a prominent computer magazine. In retrospect, I think it should have been named "Best product *idea* of '85." The writers and editors of the magazine apparently didn't even test the device. Maybe it was too difficult to set up, so they didn't bother. And — despite the free publicity — Oberon International bit the dust. Maybe the price was too steep for most people — even if it worked as advertised!

Now, apparently, a company called G.A.S. International Inc. in Euless, Texas, is unloading the machines for $199 each. Since their full-page advertisements in many computer magazines do not mention Oberon, the role of G.A.S. is not immediately obvious. In fact, they are merely acting as a liquidator of the existing stock. The units are no longer being produced.

Not knowing about Oberon's downfall or any performance problems, the Omni-Reader looked attractive to me at that price, so I obtained a unit for testing purposes.

Ah, if only it worked, I'd be able to tell you about all its good features today. Instead, here's a list of the performance problems I encountered:

✔ Difficult to set up. Many hours of a technician's time were required, mainly in a futile effort to verify that the performance problems encountered were not related to the set up.

✔ Operating technique hard to master. A cover letter with the unit said I should be patient. The device should be moved over each text line in 2 to 3 seconds, at a constant rate of speed. I tried. Not too fast, not too slow. After about a half hour of continuous frustration, I began blaming the unit and not my technique.

✔ Quirky, unpredictable operation. When scanning a line of text, it would always produce errors. Sometimes just a few, sometimes a lot. Careful proofing of the results was necessary.

✔ Blank spaces not read properly. The unit had trouble recognizing the length of blank spaces interspersed with text. For example, if I tried to scan a page containing mailing labels, typed three across, it did not accurately position the address and city information directly under each name.

✔ Finally, it was necessary for the scanner to see a short "runway" of blank space before each line of text, and for the operator to press the return key on the keyboard after each line was entered. These requirements created additional errors and inefficiencies.

Worst of all, what if you feel that the unit is not functioning properly and you want your money back? You're out of luck. The company provides only a "30-day replacement warranty," which means they'll only replace it with another.

In short, the Omni-Reader from G.A.S. International is a rip-off. The product concept has the potential to save you time, and the advertisement leads you to believe that the potential is fulfilled. But it doesn't deliver.

Happily, other OCR, or optical character recognition, products do a better job of fulfilling the potential, and I'll evaluate them in future columns.

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